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ABSTRACT

The careers and backgrounds of female upper-level administrators of 25 North Carolina four-year colleges and universities are examined. Half of the group was employed by private colleges and half by institutions of the North Carolina system. The administrators reported to the highest or next-highest institutional management level. During two-hour structured interviews with each respondent, information was elicited about growing up; education; the influence of family, friends, and mentors; work history; perceptions of the field of higher education administration; the special skills and experience it requires; the climate in which they work; and the potential for women in the field as well as in their particular institution. This autobiographical information was supplemented by each respondent's curriculum vita and catalogs, job descriptions, and program brochures. With the exception of four respondents, all of the study group had earned doctorates; of the remainder two had honorary doctorates and the others had masters degrees. Nine administrative roles were represented. Common themes found in the investigation include: these women all had a history of meeting opportunity head-on and they had the credentials and experience required; although most of the women did not come to their current posts via a series of administrative roles, all had demonstrated managerial skills in other settings; all of the women had found ways to enhance their careers or further their own development; and the younger women (aged 35 to 45) tended to be much more aware of their career planning. (SW)

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CAREER PATHS OF UPPER-LEVEL WOMEN ADMINISTRATORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Career Paths of Upper-Level Women Administrators in Higher Education Institutions

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Despite equal opportunity legislation, affirmative action, and a social climate more supportive of women's professional aspirations, the position of women in academe appears to have changed very little over the past several decades. In particular, women's progress into the upper levels of higher education administration has been especially slow. It has been noted that about ninety-five percent of today's college students attend institutions where all three of the top administrative positions--president, chief academic officer, and dean--are held by men.

Some of this may seem to be explained in terms of credentials and experience. Because women earn only one quarter of the doctorates awarded, and continue to cluster in the lower faculty ranks, the pool of those eligible for management posts is very small. Yet these facts do not address the more fundamental issues of differential socialization, occupational stereotyping, and the traditions and values of higher education that tend to work to the disadvantage of females. In addition, so few women "at the top" perpetuates the problem by setting subtle limitations on other's perceptions of what is possible and thus, worth striving for.

This cycle has suggested an investigation that focuses on achievement rather than the lack of it. Although their numbers are small, clearly some women have overcome whatever barriers exist and now hold positions of high responsibility in academic administration. The perspective of the study is that their career paths can be instructive about the nature of their success--the balance of choice and chance and the behaviors and strategies that have been utilized to enhance the possibilities.

The source of data is a sample of 30 women who are currently upper-level administrators in 25 different North Carolina four-year colleges and universities. A variety of positions is represented with half of the group employed by private colleges and half by institutions of The University of North Carolina system. The investigator personally conducted a two-hour structured interview with each subject covering background and education; the influence of family, friends, and mentors; and work history. Participants were also asked for their perceptions of the climate in which they work, the skills they consider most valuable, how well they fit their jobs, and about future plans.

The findings have broad implications related to the fuller utilization of educated and talented women in society. Particular insights have been provided about women's careers and how they differ from men's; about administration in higher education and the skills that women bring to that endeavor; about the position of women in academic institutions and their qualities as workplaces; and most important, about the nature of women's professional achievement, with common themes suggesting that both motivation and opportunity can be shaped to fit personal visions of success.

UNCOMMON WOMEN/COMMON THEMES
Career Paths of Upper-Level Women Administrators in Higher Education Institutions

> The most important single observation about women in the academic world is that their numbers decrease dramatically as the importance of the post increases.
>
> Patricia A. Graham
> (1974)

INTRODUCTION

The Problem

That statement appropriately sets the stage for an investigation which deals with upper-level women administrators in higher education--or more precisely, with the lack of them. For, despite the fact that there are more women than ever before earning advanced degrees, holding faculty appointments, and serving in various management roles, their progress into positions of administrative leadership has been notably slow. It is common knowledge that the realm of upper administration in academe is predominantly male. Thus, the few women who are there are indeed uncommon in their level of achievement.

To be uncommon, however, is only one aspect of the problem. It is also important to recognize the settings in which most of this achievement has taken place. Although relatively little statistical information is available about women administrators, what we have indicates that those at the highest levels tend to be found in women's colleges and on the smaller campuses (under 3000 students). As a recent study of the Association of American Colleges has reported: "Ninety-five percent of today's college students attend institutions where all three of the top administrative positions--president, chief academic officer, and dean--are held by men" (Sandler, 1979, p. 12). Thus, not only are the numbers of such

women limited but, even more critical, the impact of their presence is limited as well.

The question of "Why so few?" yields different answers depending upon one's perspective. If women are viewed as "newcomers" to the academic profession, then they could be expected to occupy the lower rungs of the career ladder, and their small numbers at the top could be seen as representative of the current pool of those with appropriate training and experience. From the other perspective, however, women cannot be viewed as "newcomers" since they have a considerable history of involvement in the enterprise and have made some distinguished contributions to its leadership. Thus, there is no easy explanation for their continued paucity. What appears to be the case is that individual women have achieved in all aspects of higher education, but women as a group have made only limited progress.

Foundations of the Study

Given the major forces of recent decades--equity legislation, affirmative action, the Women's Movement, and general changes in societal attitudes and values--this observation is somewhat puzzling. It suggests that fundamental questions still exist about women's place in society and the nature of their aspirations. At the same time, it suggests the possibility that those aspirations may be inhibited in ways that men's are not. This issue has been widely addressed in the literature and continuing barriers to women's professional achievement have been identified. Some of these are internal and relate to women's own ambivalence about their societal roles and the consequences of careers. Others are external and relate to institutional traditions and structures (many of them in higher education) that tend to curtail their full participation.

Yet, more troublesome than the barriers themselves is the statistical reality to which they have contributed. The very lack of women at the top in academic administration perpetuates the problem by setting subtle limitations on other's perceptions of what is possible and thus, worth striving for.

It is that cycle which has suggested a study dealing with positive rather than negative factors; with what has enhanced women's careers rather than blocked them; with ambition fulfilled rather than thwarted. This investigation looks beyond barriers to achievement by exploring the careers of women who are currently upper-level administrators in higher education institutions. In doing so it is hoped there will be useful information for helping others to realize their potential. In addition, insights should be provided about women's careers and how they differ from men's; about academic institutions as workplaces and the position of women in them; about administration in higher education and the special skills it may require; and about the nature of women's professional achievement.

Two concepts have helped to structure this study. First, it has been anticipated that success would be far more instructive than failure. Useful strategies evolve from success. Success encourages openness and objectivity. And rather than illuminating problems, success illuminates the ways in which problems can be overcome.

The study has also taken the position that careers depend on both individual and environmental factors. Personal determination in itself is not enough; the initiatives of others and outside circumstances are also needed. Thus, careers are viewed as having two dimensions--motivation and opportunity or perhaps, choice and chance. Career achievement

would appear to belong to those who have learned how to use opportunity when it presents itself, shaping it to fit their own visions of success.

METHODOLOGY

Population and Sample

Using the population of women administrators in North Carolina's four-year colleges and universities, a purposive sample of 30 of those holding upper-level positions requiring "faculty" credentials was selected. "Upper-level" was defined as those positions reporting to the highest or next-highest institutional management level. "Faculty credentials" was defined as the doctorate or some appropriate equivalent.

A secondary consideration in sample selection was to include subjects representing a variety of such positions in order for the study to be as descriptive as possible of administration in higher education.

A final consideration was to include subjects representing a variety of institutional settings. Thus, 15 of the women were employed by The University of North Carolina system and 15 by the state's private colleges. Within the public/private dimension, an effort was also made to include different kinds of institutions (as defined by the Carnegie Code) in different geographical locations.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Using a standardized but flexible interview format, the investigator personally conducted a two-hour "conversation" with each subject at her respective institution. The first half of the interview elicited information about growing up, education, the influence of family, friends, and mentors, and work history. In the second half, the participants were asked for their perceptions of the field of higher education administration, the special skills and experience it requires, the climate in

which they work, and the potential for women in the field as well as in their particular institution.

Supplementing this autobiographical information was each subject's curriculum vita and catalogs, job descriptions, and program brochures of their own choosing. All of these materials were reviewed after the interview had been completed and served primarily as a way of checking the details and sequence of the data provided.

The interviews were scheduled and conducted over a period of three months in the fall of 1980. Initial contact was made by letter with a telephone follow-up. Although a few substitutions had to be made for persons no longer at a given institution, all those contacted and reached agreed to participate. Permission to use a tape recorder was also granted in every case.

Data Analysis and Reporting

Analysis involved three major steps: (1) review of the tapes for additional detail and elaboration of field notes; (2) data reduction through the aggregation of data, by domains, from the interview schedules; (3) synthesis of information within each domain and analysis for common themes.

Although field notes were taken during the interviews, their conversational nature made the tapes particularly important. The investigator saw her role not primarily as a note-taker but as a person with whom information was exchanged. The tapes made this approach possible by allowing the interviewer to both listen and participate more freely.

The aggregation of data by domains not only reduced the large amount of information collected but assured the anonymity of the individual participants.

Data were reported by domains since these provided a reasonable frame-

work for describing and comparing the women in the sample. Since the study was intended to be primarily exploratory and descriptive, this step was seen as its major contribution. Part of the descriptive process, however, was to seek common themes with implications for those interested in administration in higher education--talented women, certainly, as well institutions concerned with the fuller utilization of their human resources.

FINDINGS

The findings presented here must be considered preliminary since the study has not yet been completed. Because equity issues are of particular interest, most of the information included is from the final three domains of the interview schedule dealing with subjects' perceptions of academic administration, institutional climate, and self in the current role. As an appropriate starting point, some general characteristics of the sample are presented.

General Characteristics

With the exception of four subjects, all those in the sample had earned doctorates. Of those who did not, one had been awarded two honorary doctorates and the others had masters degrees. Those without the doctorate all had special training or skills, however, and one of these was the president of her institution.

Nine different admininstrative roles were represented (see Figure 1). Among those in public institutions, the most frequently-held post was in the "Deans of Schools" category, while in private institutions itwas in the "Academic Officers" group.

Participants were divided equally between public and private institutions in North Carolina. In all, 25 different campuses were represented, 11 of them public and 14 private (see Table 1 and Figure 2).

As could be anticipated by the nature of their positions, two-thirds of the women were over the age of 45. Only one was under 35, a distinction she outgrew several weeks after the interview.

The racial composition of the sample was two-thirds white and one-third minority women. That one-third included nine blacks and one American Indian.

Most of the women were married or had been and over half were parents. The average family size was between two and three children.

Early Background

The sample members appeared to have rather strong ties to the region since 20 were from southern states (with 10 of those from North Carolina). Given that flavor, it is probably not surprising that more than two-thirds of the women grew up in rural or small town settings. Half came from relatively large families with three or more siblings, while seven were only children. Two-thirds of the mothers worked outside the home, at least part-time, during their daughters' growing up years. Due to the Depression, almost all experienced some measure of financial insecurity. Yet almost without exception they reported happy, stable childhoods with caring, hardworking parents and little sense of real deprivation.

Educational Background

Most of the parents of these women did not attend college and a number never finished high school. Yet they placed great value on education and encouraged their daughters' scholastic efforts. All of the subjects liked school and a number were early readers. Many named a favorite teacher as a childhood role model. Most attended colleges and universities in the south with over half choosing a North Carolina institution for either undergraduate or graduate work, and in a few instances for both. The general orientation of their undergraduate preparation was toward the humanities, with several in science and several others in professional fields such as nursing and home economics. Although the trend toward work in education is apparent at the

Master's level, more than one third of their doctorates were earned in traditional disciplines such as history, literature, sociology, or zoology, rather than in professional education studies.

Work History

It is probably significant that the work history of these women is quite continuous rather than discontinuous. Although several reported time out for raising children, the return to graduate school was for most the only major interruption in the work sequence. Some differences were noted here between the younger and older members of the sample. While the younger women tended to go directly from undergraduate to graduate study, the older women tended to do so later, as a step in an already established career direction. For both groups, however, the notion of a "re-entry career" does not apply.

Several distinct tracks to administration were observed. Over half followed the most familiar route in higher education--teaching, or the academic track with its several professorial ranks. Others developed their careers in professional fields such as nursing and library science. A number began their careers in public school teaching, sometimes moving into administrative roles and from those, into higher education. Three attributed their entry into academe to high-level administrative experience in other areas--one in business and two in volunteer work.

Of the 30 women administrators in the sample, nine had been directly recruited into their current positions. For the others, it took an average of four or five years within the current institution. For the total group, the period of service to their institutions was about eleven years, with some serving in a number of roles on their way to the top.

Perceptions of Academic Administration

In discussing this study in connection with equity issues, it must be remembered that all of the participants were persons currently holding high level posts in higher education administration. In this sense, if they had faced discrimination in getting there, it had been effectively overcome. For this reason, the study did not deal directly with the matter of equity, but did so indirectly as a part of the tracing of career paths.

For example, as the subjects discussed their aspirations to be administrators, they were asked if they had ever been discouraged from their goals by being women. For most, the answer was, "No," although they acknowedged that there were subtle pressures involved relating to the traditional expectations of peers or employers concerning women. One participant remembered being asked about her husband and daughter when she applied for a high-level administrative position: "How will it affect them if you are offered the job?" Another spoke of being aware of far more restrictive norms for women than for men concerning dress and behavioral style. And still another spoke of the constant pressure to conform: "To be a regular fellow," as she put it, a role she found difficult if not impossible. Some of what these women were describing were the problems faced by outsiders in general, when they become insiders. There is always uncertainty, especially in the most traditional realms, about people who are "different." Yet, as one woman summarized, "Ultimately, the problem is not the differences; it's getting people to accept them."

Most of the participants reported that in time these kinds of irritations disappeared. It would seem that the more serious problems these women faced had to do with questions of power and authority once in their jobs rather than with any hurdles thay had faced in moving into them. There

were a number of statements concerning slights or oversights: times when they were not consulted; times when the work they had done was not recognized or worse, credited to others. There were some obvious personality clashes and perceived lack of support from their peers in administration. On the other hand, those same persons reported strong support from faculty and from students, suggesting that those in administration are more narrow in their views--about women, about higher education, about the world in general. It appeared that many of the subjects saw themselves as persons of broader interests and abilities than the male colleagues with whom they worked.

Although the participants sometimes questioned the competence of others, they rarely questioned their own. They clearly felt well prepared for their roles although many of them felt they had arrived by "being in the right place at the right time." While that may have been true to a degree, they had also established a pattern of taking on responsibility whenever it was offered. Thus, neither the big opportunity, nor their acceptance of it, seemed especially surprising.

The younger women (aged 35 to 45) tended to be much more aware of their career planning. Most were able to enumerate deliberate steps in the process. In academe this most often meant serving on particular committees, being available for particular assignments, attending particular professional meetings. While the older women could cite similar involvements, they seemed to have done these things by instinct rather than by plan, a difference which suggests considerable change in the expectations for women and their career development.

One of the most interesting contributions of the study is the description by the subjects of the personal qualities and skills that administrators need in order to perform well in their jobs. Included are management skills such as decision-making, planning, organizing, delegating, communicating,

and evaluating--as well as people skills such as support, trust, patience, integrity, openness, humor, and sensitivity. More than any other single factor, however, these women valued being generalists: "The sort of person it takes years to become," said one. Thus references to interpretive skills and the qualities of perspective and vision emerged and re-emerged throughout the interviews.

Perceptions of Institutional Climate

Many of the perceptions shared by the subjects about their institutions related to working in a mostly-male management atmosphere. Many expressed the sense that their positions were "firing line jobs" or very "exposed." "All you do is noticed," said one. "You must be careful not to be too open," said another. As indicated earlier, they felt lonely and isolated at times and expressed the need to have someone with whom to share small problems. As for the big problems, most reported that they had good access to their male superiors.

An interesting point was raised in connection with male subordinates. Several of the women had found this a troublesome relationship, comparing it to mother and grown sons who are seeking autonomy and independence. Thus, they suggested that a kind of rebellion is almost built in to that situation.

While many described their institutions as somewhat less than perfect, most expressed a deeply felt commitment to institutional goals and purposes. There were also many statements concerning the transient nature of administration--that one is expendable and in fact should be for the good of the institution. "There is a limited span for administrators," one subject said, but she cautioned, "you must stay long enough to demonstrate that you are able to sustain." On the whole, however, these women were indicating that one must not get too attached to an administrative job. One must have other interests and satisfactions and, most important, other options. One must never run out of plans.

Many of the women were asked about affirmative action in their institutions and its effects on their lives and careers. While none of them could attribute obtaining their present positions through formal affirmative action procedures, they were well aware that the guidelines have brought initiatives where there were none before. Also, many of them mentioned that affirmative action as a policy is personally supportive and encouraging because of the commitment it represents to all women and minorities.

Perception of Self and Current Role

This area gave the participants an opportunity to assess their positions, to comment on some of their career goals and strategies, and to view themselves in their current roles. What emerged was that these women are performers. They appear to be up to the demands of their jobs and, while everything is not right with "the system" in their institutions, they have learned to manage within it.

In general, they shared the view that one has to prepare for opportunity and that is indeed what most of them did. The fact is that many had been honing their administrative skills for a long time and when opportunity arrived, they simply transferred those skills from one setting to another. The same was true of varied job or life experiences, which always seemed to be adaptable for use in new circumstances. And they were especially good at interpreting their backgrounds and presenting themselves and their qualifications. One senses a great economy in the careful utilization of every effort. They appear to have gotten mileage out of almost eveything that they have learned and accomplished.

There was also the perception that these women are now in the process of defining their jobs in their own terms. Participants often indicated that the lack of definition was an early problem. On the other hand, the oversight, if it was one, became useful later. Thus, most of these women

have found room in their work to maneuver and to rethink their roles. That process has stirred ambitions in some. Several subjects shared the information that, although not unhappy with their current circumstances, they are looking for new possibilities. One said simply, "I want to be a college president."

In findings related to the equity issue, there is no doubt that these women feel a clear responsibility to other women who are making their way up the career ladder. They are keenly aware of their mentor and role-model status. Most value the support system that women are developing although not to the exclusion of existing professional networks. They are skilled at engaging people in their causes. And, as administratrators and as women, they have a real desire to see other people succeed. Only a few would be labeled political or activist in their response to this challenge. But all understand the implications of their job performance for themselves, and for others.

CONCLUSIONS/COMMON THEMES

Although there are more findings yet to come, a number of common themes are already apparent:

Few career breaks: Most of this group of women have come up their career ladders very much as men have. Their work histories have been continuous rather than discontinuous, although possibly, at some cost to themselves and their families. It may be a choice that women must make.

Generalists: Many of those in the sample had this outlook, either through training or temperment or as a result of life experiences. They consider perspective and vision as crucial to administration and occasionally perceived conflict with male peers whose backgrounds tended to be more specialized.

Accepting responsibility: These women all had a history of meeting opportunity head-on. Some of this may have been due to the support and encouragement of others. Much of it was due to their own sense of competence as well as their personal energy and endurance. When the "big" opportunity came, they had all the credentials and experience they needed and simply could not be overlooked.

Managerial experience: Although most of these women did not come to their current posts via a series of administrative roles, all had demonstrated managerial skills in other settings--the ability to plan, to organize, to work as part of a team with many different people.

Personal skills: Although their leadership styles were varied, all of the members of the sample had a great range of personal skills--from warmth and wit to sensitivity and patience. Without exception, all were articulate and engaging personalities as well.

Career skills: Whether they were aware of it or not, all of the 30 women in this study had found ways to enhance their careers or further their own development. They learned how to utilize past experience to the fullest, even when non-academic. They learned how to develop their own networks and support systems. And they learned how to present themselves and their competencies in the context of new opportunities.

One final theme is not listed with the others because, in a sense, it is the sum of all of them: these women are professionals, loyal to their colleagues, concerned with their institutions, devoted to their work. It is not surprising, then, that the greatest responsibility they feel to other women and to the issue of equity in higher education relates to this professionalism--to doing the very best that they can in the positions they now occupy. They fully recognize that their career success

has meaning for others, both men and women--and they are well aware that being uncommon gives them a special opportunity. While other voices may suggest stronger initiatives, this one seems appropriate to this particular group, to their personal outlooks and to the nature of their professional commitments.

The comment of one participant, an older black woman, clarifies this perspective. "I no longer feel the need," she said, "to be so embattled over being either black or a woman." And what she meant by that was not withdrawal, but rather, that she made her most important statement for both, by being who she was.

Graham, Patricia A. Women in academic life. In R.B. Kundsin (Ed.), Women and success. New York: William Morrow, 1974.

Sandler, Bernice R. You've come a long way maybe--or why it still hurts to be a woman in labor. Current Issues in Higher Education, 1979, (4, Employment practices in academe).

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Figure 1

Administrative Roles Represented by the Sample

Administrative Roles	Subjects	
	Public	Private
Chief Executive Officers		
Highest Level (single institution)	-	1
Next-highest (within a system)	-	-
Academic Officers		
Highest Level	-	4
Next-highest	3	-
Development Officers		
Highest Level	-	1
Next-highest	1	-
Student Life Officers		
Highest Level	1	1
Next-highest	-	2
Admissions/Records Officers		
Highest Level	1	-
Next-highest	-	-
Community/Public Services Officers		
Highest Level	-	1
Next-highest	-	-
Institutional Research/Planning Officers		
Highest Level	-	1
Next-highest	-	-
Health Affairs Officers		
Highest Level	-	-
Next-highest	1	1
Deans of Schools		
Highest Level	6	2
Next-highest	2	1
	15	15

Highest Level includes Deans, Vice Presidents, Vice Chancellors, Directors
Next-highest includes Assistant Vice Presidents, Assistant Vice Chancellors, Associate Deans

Table 1

Distribution of the Sample Across 25 North Carolina Institutions, by Type of Institution

Public Four-Year Institutions			Private Four-Year Institutions		
Institutional Type	N Campuses	N Subjects	Institutional Type	N Campuses	N Subjects
PH.D.-Granting	3	6	PH.D.-Granting	2	3
Comprehensive	6	7	Comprehensive	-	-
Liberal Arts	2	2	Liberal Arts	12	12
TOTALS	11 *	15		14 *	15

* 11 of 16 public four-year campuses are represented. Included among the 11 are 4 predominantly minority institutions.

* 14 of 30 private four-year campuses are represented. Included among the 14 are 4 predominantly minority institutions and 4 women's colleges.

Figure 2

Geographic Distribution of

Institutions Represented by the Sample